

BALANCING KINETIC EFFECTS OF AIRPOWER WITH COUNTERINSURGENCY OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN**

by

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BALANCING KINETIC EFFECTS OF AIRPOWER WITH COUNTERINSURGENCY OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN

In this type of war you cannot – you must not – measure the effectiveness of the effort by the number of bridges destroyed, buildings damaged, vehicles burned, or any of the other standards that have been used for regular warfare. The task is to destroy the effectiveness of the insurgent's efforts and his ability to use the population for his own ends.¹

—General Curtis E. Lemay
Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force

In the pre-dawn hours of 22 August 2008, U.S. and Afghan Forces conducted a combined operation in Heart Province to capture/kill a High Value Individual (HVI). Intelligence reports indicated that 20-30 Anti-Coalition Militant (ACM) fighters were holding a Shura² in the village of Azizabad.³ Upon infiltration, U.S. and Afghan Forces came under heavy ACM fire. They returned fire with small-arms and crew served weapons and directed close air support (CAS) assets to target ACM positions. An AC-130H gunship engaged and destroyed several ACM targets in Azizabad village. Initial U.S. reports stated 30-35 Taliban militants were killed to include Mullah Sadiq, a known Taliban commander. In addition, the U.S. stated the operation resulted in 5-7 civilian deaths.⁴ At the same time the U.S. was reporting these numbers; other organizations such as the U.N. claimed the civilian death toll was much higher. An official U.N. statement claimed as many as 90 civilians were killed, of which 75 were women and children.⁵ The international community and Afghan people were outraged as the details of this operation unfolded in the media. Since the Azizabad operation, there have been three additional coalition operations in Afghanistan that have resulted in civilian casualties where airpower was involved.

Defining the Issue

Over the past three years the number of civilian casualties caused by coalition airstrikes in Afghanistan has risen. According to Human Rights Watch, 116 Afghan civilians were killed in 13 airstrikes in 2006. In 2007 that number nearly tripled when 321 Afghan civilians were killed in 22 airstrikes. Then in the first seven months of 2008, 119 Afghan civilians were killed in 12 airstrikes.⁶ This increasing trend in civilian casualties has strained U.S. and Afghan relations and generated a great deal of negative media attention. Diplomatic tensions have risen to the point where the Afghan cabinet recently demanded negotiation of a more formal status of forces agreement to spell out combat authorities of foreign forces and to limit U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan.⁷ In addition, Afghan President Hamid Karzai in a November 2008 interview commented that if he could he would ground U.S. warplanes before they could inflict civilian casualties and destroy villages.⁸ Beyond the issues of diplomatic tension and negative media attention, the increased number of airstrike related civilian casualties has had a negative effect on U.S. strategic objectives in the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight in Afghanistan. Is the correct course of action to withhold the kinetic effects of airpower by grounding warplanes as President Karzai suggests, or are the kinetic effects of airpower a key component of our counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and crucial to achieving U.S. strategic objectives in counterinsurgency? How do we balance the kinetic effects of airpower with U.S. strategic counterinsurgency objectives in Afghanistan?

To answer the question at hand, this paper will examine the importance of kinetic airpower in Afghanistan, key strategic objectives for counterinsurgency operations, the current application of kinetic airpower in theater, enemy counters to kinetic airpower and

the effect kinetic airpower has had on U.S. counterinsurgency objectives. The paper will conclude with recommendations on how to balance the use of kinetic airpower with counterinsurgency objectives.

The Need for Airpower. U.S. counterinsurgency strategy and the Afghan operational environment drive requirements that make the availability and employment of kinetic airpower an essential part of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. A fundamental tenet of U.S. military employment is to apply combat power through combined arms action to achieve maximum effect. In particular, counterinsurgency operations require a combined arms approach emphasizing small-unit capabilities and information tasks.⁹ Kinetic airpower is an important element of combined arms employment and its primary role in counterinsurgency operations is to provide fire support. “Fixed-wing aircraft’s flexibility, range, speed, lethality, precision, and ability to mass at a desired time and place contribute significantly to overall joint fire support.”¹⁰ Joint fire support is a key enabler for military operations with the current U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan.

U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan relies on small-unit operations and special operations forces (SOF). According to Army Field Manual 3-24, battalion-sized and smaller unit operations are often most effective for countering insurgent activities.¹¹ By conducting small-unit operations, the U.S. assumes risk as the insurgents operate using a range of force size from employing as individuals to small units to massed forces. The counterinsurgent can never be certain when and where they will be engaged and the size of force they will encounter. As such, fire support is an important insurance policy in case a small coalition unit encounters a force superior

in numbers or firepower. In addition, U.S. counterinsurgency strategy advocates that counterinsurgent forces must lighten their combat loads and enforce a habit of speed and mobility to gain maneuver parity with the lightly equipped insurgent.¹² A key enabler to lightening combat loads is access to fire support.¹³ Airpower's flexibility and ability to mass at a desired time and place allow small and lightly equipped units to have more firepower for protection and maneuverability making it an ideal fire support element for these operations.¹⁴

U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan extensively employ SOF. Many SOF operations target HVIs who are mobile and whose positions are not fixed with high confidence until the last minute. These operations require a great deal of maneuver and flexibility. This dynamic presents a unique fire support requirement that is hard to source with ground-based fires. Airpower is the primary fire support element for this type of mission due to its ability to rapidly relocate in a short period of time and provide fires for SOF, no matter where they execute their mission. In addition, airpower's ability to update a targeting solution while weapons are in flight enables SOF to engage moving targets with fire support.

The Afghan operational environment presents three operational challenges; dispersed operations areas, terrain, and urban warfare. Afghanistan is a vast country and operations are conducted over long range and across dispersed areas requiring the range and speed of airpower's supporting fires. Its landmass encompasses 647,500 square kilometers which makes it one and a half times larger than Iraq (roughly the size of Texas) and its population is sixteen percent larger than Iraq's population.¹⁵ Its population distribution is twenty-three percent urban and seventy-seven percent rural.¹⁶

The coalition has 70,350 troops in Afghanistan conducting counterinsurgency operations which is only forty-six percent the size of the force in Iraq.¹⁷ Population centers are isolated and spread out across this vast country. Artillery fire support bases are located throughout Afghanistan but due to the size of the country and dispersed nature of its population centers, not all areas can be ranged by ground fires. As such, counterinsurgency operations outside the range of land-based fires must utilize airpower as the only fire support option available. Fire support from airpower can range the entire country. It can also do this with very little notice by utilizing alert aircraft that are on call for CAS. Airpower is a force multiplier and allows the coalition to cover more battlespace with fewer forces. Until force structure is significantly increased in Afghanistan and more fire support bases created, airpower will remain the only fire support option in some areas and the only one that can range the entire country.

Afghanistan's terrain is harsh. The country is predominately mountainous with the Hindu Kush mountain range splitting the country east to west and there are plains in the north and southwest. The mountain areas are rugged and traversed by deep valleys. Operations in the mountain areas are difficult at best. This terrain presents a difficult targeting problem for land-based fires on the backside of ridges and in deep valleys where fire base location and trajectory of land-based fires result in areas that cannot be targeted. Airpower operating in the third dimension is the only fire support element that can negate these terrain challenges and provide fire support where land-based fires cannot.

Even though seventy-seven percent of the Afghan population is rural, a large number of counterinsurgency engagements take place in villages which place

operations in the category of urban warfare. Airpower's flexibility and precision are key enablers for counterinsurgency operations in an urban environment. Kinetic airpower gives the ground force commander (GFC) fires flexibility not only from the stand point of axis of attack but also in size and type of the kinetic effect. The majority of coalition aircraft in Afghanistan carry ordnance loads that provide a range of kinetic effects from small, such as 20mm gun rounds, up to large, such as 2000-pound bombs. No other fire support element can provide such a range of effects from one source. The majority of bombs carried by coalition aircraft are either precision delivered or precision guided munitions. The GFC has access to fires with accuracies in the neighborhood of feet. Both the ability to scale effects and the precision fires of airpower allow the ground force commander to limit collateral damage and casualties while lethality engaging the enemy. This capability is crucial in counter insurgency operations. Of all the elements of joint fire support, airpower is the best element suited to support ground forces in this operational environment making it a key component of the U.S.'s military counterinsurgency strategy.

Counterinsurgency Strategic Objective. In the context of Afghanistan, an insurgency is the organized, protracted politico-military struggle by the Anti-Coalition Militants to weaken the control and legitimacy of the Afghani government while trying to increase their own control. Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and thus needs to be the central focus for U.S. counterinsurgency strategy.¹⁸ The strategic center of gravity for counterinsurgency is the Afghan people¹⁹ as their support and acceptance of either the insurgents or the counterinsurgents determines who wields the political power and who will ultimately control the country. Both the insurgent and

counterinsurgents need and compete for support from the population to win and this is what Galula refers to as the first law of counterinsurgency warfare.²⁰ Thus, winning the support of the Afghan people is the strategic objective of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

In counterinsurgency, support of the population not only means sympathy and approval of the people but also their active participation in the fight against insurgents.²¹ Galula divides the population into three categories; the active minority for the cause, the neutral majority, and the active minority against the cause. His second law of counterinsurgency is to rely on the active minority that favors the counterinsurgents to influence the neutral majority so they eliminate or neutralize the minority that favors the insurgents.²² The goal is to separate the insurgent from the population and to isolate them rendering them ineffective. All efforts in counterinsurgency operations need to keep this goal in mind. "First do no harm" must be the central consideration.²³ Collateral damage and civilian casualties is the number one cause of friction in this crucial relationship. Any operation or action that hurts the counterinsurgent's relationship with the favorable minority and the neutral majority will have negative effects on the strategic objective and the ability to win.

Insurgents have an asymmetric advantage over the counterinsurgents in the fight for popular support as the insurgents live and move freely among the people. This gives them access which makes separating them from the population difficult. To separate the insurgents from the population, counterinsurgents have to focus operations and efforts in four key areas; security, governance, services and legitimacy. The government has to apply national power in the political, military, economic, social,

information and infrastructure fields and disciplines to be dominant in these key areas. The counterinsurgents must dominate the key areas, provide the population with basic needs and address their grievances to separate and isolate the insurgents from the population.

Security is the starting point and cornerstone of counterinsurgency operations.²⁴ The people's first concern is physical security from crime and the insurgency. In Afghanistan this task is primarily a function of coalition forces in coordination with the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). The three pillars of the current U.S. Afghan security strategy are to continue combat operations, operate provincial reconstruction teams, and equip and train the ANA and ANP.²⁵ The goal of the security strategy is not only to remove the insurgent from the population but to provide an environment where governance takes hold and the government can provide the people basic services such as power, water, roads and medical care to name a few. When an area gains physical security, the Afghan government is able to address the peoples' grievances and to institute positive and permanent reforms that benefit the people. Locally defined legitimacy is coin of the realm.²⁶ As the government advances in these areas, they increase their legitimacy with the local population and further separate the insurgents from the people. Security is the key enabler that sets the stage for government legitimacy and allows the government to focus on the people. "Without physical security for the people, a COIN campaign is going nowhere useful, no matter how sophisticated its doctrine or well coordinated its centrally civilian-directed efforts."²⁷

Counterinsurgencies are won at the strategic level.²⁸ Even though security is a key enabler for counterinsurgency operations, military action is not the focus at the

strategic level, but rather political action. At the tactical and operational level, the insurgent forces and its leaders are centers of gravity and military action to negate or destroy them is the focus. At the strategic level the Afghan people are the center of gravity and political action is the focus. Counterinsurgents can win every battle at the tactical and operational level but still lose the battle at the strategic level. "While protecting against tactical or operational-level defeat on the battlefield[s] of...Afghanistan, our military needs to also guard against the dangers of strategic-level defeat."²⁹ As such, military activities should be subordinate to political activities in counterinsurgency.³⁰

Application of Airpower in Afghanistan. Airpower is an important instrument in the Combatant Commander's tool kit and is used in Afghanistan in both a non-kinetic and kinetic manner to support counterinsurgency operations. Non-kinetic applications of airpower include electronic attack, counter IED support, combat search and rescue; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), command and control, space operations, mobility, and information operations. Kinetic applications of airpower include precision engagement in the interdiction, dynamic targeting or close air support roles.

In the interdiction role, kinetic airpower is employed against fixed targets that are planned in depth prior to execution. This allows the crew to plan execution with the benefit of intelligence and a detail collateral damage estimate. In this mode of operation airpower is used as shaping fires to support ground operations or part of an air campaign to target high interest target sets. In the dynamic targeting role, kinetic airpower is employed against either a fixed or mobile target and the tasking timeline

does not afford the crew time to plan in depth prior to execution. Rough planning, intelligence and a collateral damage estimate are generated by the Air Operation Center (AOC) and passed to the crew as they are en route to the target. In this role airpower is used to target theater high value and high payoff targets. Finally, in the close air support role, kinetic airpower is employed against a variety of target types based on the fire support requirements generated by the ground force commander. Fires are not preplanned but are coordinated as the operation or battle unfolds so intelligence for the target is very limited and aircrew must use a field generated collateral damage estimates for execution.

Kinetic airpower provides the ground force commander with precision fires and scalable effects for close air support. Based on aircraft weapons loads, the GFC has a sliding scale of fire effects he can apply to the tactical situation. If he is supported by an F-15E the GFC's effects options range from a show of presence up to employment of a 2000-pound bomb. If the desired effect is to reassure the population, the GFC can call for a show of presence. If the GFC wants to dissuade an attack or break contact with the enemy without using kinetic force, he can call for a show of force. If the tactical situation dictates kinetic effects to destroy targets or kill ACM, the GFC can call for fires utilizing a 20mm gun, a 250-pound bomb, a 500-pound bomb or a 2000-pound bomb. With these scalable effects, the GFC can start at the lowest possible end of the fires spectrum and escalate his response as the tactical situation dictates. In addition to scalable effects, kinetic airpower can provide the GFC with a limited reconnaissance and surveillance capability. In Afghanistan, most kinetic airpower platforms are equipped with an active optical or infrared target pod. The pod's primary function is to

find targets and guide precision fires, but they can also be used for reconnaissance and surveillance of potential targets. This allows aircrew to give the GFC additional intelligence on potential targets and to check for and mitigate potential collateral damage and causality. The capability to employ scalable effects and to check for and mitigate collateral damage and casualties are very important to counterinsurgency operations as the GFC tries to balance the tactical-level focus of engaging and defeating ACM forces with the strategic-level focus of winning support of the population.

Airpower provides an asymmetric edge to counterinsurgency operations. The unfettered access to the high ground or third dimension of air and space provides the coalition an uncontested dimension in which to operate against the insurgent.³¹ Kinetic airpower's ability to leverage the third dimension, space-based reconnaissance, the Global Positioning System and precision munitions allows the coalition to employ with precision through clouds and bad weather, day and night, and to inflict heavy losses on the enemy. It can operate beyond the insurgent's visual and acoustic range to conduct surveillance and employ precision fires. Kinetic airpower's effectiveness in counterinsurgency operation is best illustrated by a communication that was intercepted from a Taliban commander where he said, "Tanks and armor are not a big deal — the planes are the killers. I can handle everything but the jet fighters."³² In addition, this asymmetry has proven to be a powerful psychological weapon to attack ACM morale.³³ ACM are scared of airpower's strike capability and this has driven their strategy so as to avoid airpower and to find ways to marginalize it.³⁴ The Anti-Coalition Militants are unable to counter the effects of kinetic airpower with force on force application so they

have turned to asymmetric means to counter the impact kinetic airpower has had in the counterinsurgency fight.

ACM Counters to Airpower. Kinetic airpower is a special target singled out by the enemy to nullify its effects.³⁵ Anti-Coalition Militants use a variety asymmetric approaches to take away the coalition's kinetic airpower asymmetric advantage. The insurgent's goal is to either render kinetic airpower ineffective or to shape a situation to where its effects are negative thus creating an environment where the coalition is forced to withhold the use of kinetic airpower. This is done through actions that drive a wedge between the counterinsurgent and the population so as to diminish the people's support for the government. It forces the coalition to consider withholding kinetic airpower in order to preserve the strategic objective of winning the support of the Afghan people. The ways ACM set conditions to drive this phenomenon is by forcing an overreaction, complicating the targeting problem and employing propaganda.

Often insurgents will take an action or conduct an operation with the primary purpose of eliciting an overreaction from counterinsurgent forces.³⁶ Their goal is to benefit from the second and third-order effects of the coalition's overreaction. By creating a situation where coalition forces have to commit kinetic airpower, they hope to cause either collateral damage/casualties or create a perception that the coalition forces are heavy-handed and cruel. This creates a David versus Goliath type image in the media and population which drives sympathy towards the insurgents.³⁷ The short-term effect of using kinetic airpower may gain military advantage but the long-term effect will be counterproductive if the action turns popular sentiment against the coalition.³⁸

A complimentary tactic to forcing an overreaction is complicating the targeting problem. Anti-Coalition Militants complicate the coalition's targeting problem by engaging coalition forces in urban areas while in the presence of civilians. This levels the playing field for the insurgent as coalition forces are not able to take full advantage of its superior firepower, speed and mobility as it would in open terrain.³⁹ Urban areas complicate airpower's ability to find, fix, and finish targets due to the cluttered environment and collateral damage and casualty concerns. A common insurgent tactic in Afghanistan is to occupy a house in a village and then engage coalition forces from that position with civilians in the vicinity.⁴⁰ Another tactic is to mix in with the population while trying to evade coalition forces. Both these tactics create a win-win situation for the insurgent with respect to airpower. As the insurgents use human shields it forces the coalition to withhold kinetic airpower to avoid civilian casualties thus negating airpower. If the coalition does not withhold kinetic airpower, the resulting civilian casualties provide the insurgent with a huge propaganda event to leverage as a means to pull public support from the coalition and Afghan government.

Insurgents use propaganda to put a negative spin on the kinetic effects of airpower in order to ban the weapon they fear the most. ACM in Afghanistan are waging information warfare as much as combat.⁴¹ They try to turn encounters with coalition forces into situations where collateral damage and casualties become an issue so they can exploit the situation in the media and in the population. Propaganda is such an effective tool for them that they are willing to ensure civilian casualties as a standard propaganda method⁴². In the past, even if civilian casualties were not sustained during

a coalition operation, insurgents in Afghanistan have lied and made claims of civilian casualties. Galula summarizes the propaganda dynamic in counterinsurgency as;

The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibility and to his past, and for him facts speak louder than words. He is judged on what he does, not on what he says...For him, propaganda can be no more than a secondary weapon, valuable only if intended to inform and not to fool.⁴³

Insurgent propaganda is very effective in the political realm. It hurts public support for the government and drives the balance between the pro-government active minority and neutral majority in the insurgent's favor as well as decreases the government's legitimacy. A combination of actual collateral damage, actual civilian casualties and the ACM's propaganda machine has led the Afghan government to request restrictions on coalition airstrikes.

Civilian Casualties. Of all the issues that emerge during counterinsurgency operations, collateral damage and civilian casualties is the one that attracts the most negative and immediate attention from the media and population. This is particularly true of collateral damage and civilian casualties caused by airstrikes. The driving factor behind this is that when kinetic airpower is the vector, casualty numbers tend to be high due to the lethality and destructive power of the air instrument and the local perception that using airpower against small numbers of insurgents is heavy-handed.

From 2006 through 2008 the number of Afghan civilians killed annually in the conflict in Afghanistan increased.⁴⁴ During the same time period there was a corresponding increase in the number of coalition troops killed in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ This increase in conflict deaths mirrors the increased level of violence and ACM resurgence

that has been underway in Afghanistan since 2006.⁴⁶ In 2006, approximate 929 civilians were killed in the fighting related to armed conflict, of which 699 were attributed to the insurgents, 114 to coalition ground fire and 116 to coalition airstrikes. By 2007, approximate 1,633 civilians were killed in the fighting related to armed conflict, of which 950 were attributed to the insurgents, 113 to coalition ground fire and 321 to coalition airstrikes. Then, in the first seven months of 2008, approximate 540 civilians were killed in the fighting related to armed conflict, of which 367 were attributed to the insurgents, 54 to coalition ground fire and 119 to coalition airstrikes.⁴⁷ The number of civilians killed attributed to airstrikes as a percentage of total civilians killed in the conflict annually have risen over the past three years. In 2006 it was 12%, in 2007 19% and in the first part of 2008 22%. If accurate, this negative trend must be corrected.

The route cause for airstrike related civilian casualties during an operation is one of four main reasons; weapons effects, weapon malfunction, aircrew error or targeting error. The first reason, weapons effects, occurs when a poor weapons effect-to-target match is made and the weapon hits the intended target but the effects spillover into surrounding areas where civilians are located. Next is weapon malfunction. Although not common, weapons occasionally malfunction or do not hit within their designed accuracy criteria. Weapon deliveries falling in this category may not hit the intend target and can cause civilian casualties. The third cause is aircrew error. In this case aircrew are tasked with the correct target but either fail to acquire the correct target or induce weapon solution errors that cause the weapon to miss the intended target. The final cause is targeting error. This occurs when aircrew are tasked with the wrong target or a target containing civilians and they strike that target. Targeting error in this context is a

function of poor or incomplete intelligence on the civilian disposition of the target. When mission planning time is limited, the chance of target error increases. In the majority of Afghanistan's civilian casualty related airstrikes, aircrew report that they destroyed the target they were tasked with and intended to hit. As such, targeting error is the leading reason for collateral damage and civilian casualties from airstrikes.

Historically, most airstrike civilian casualties in Afghanistan occur on CAS missions during Troops in Contact (TIC) situations rather than on preplanned interdiction missions.⁴⁸ Troop in Contact situations normally occur as a result of an insurgent attack where the insurgent chooses the time and place of the attack. As such, the GFC has limited or poor intelligence on insurgent positions and may be unable to determine whether the insurgents are firing from a position near or collocated with civilians especially when the target is a house. As General Conway stated, "You want to strike the precise building that you're targeting, but sometimes there are other people there. And you don't know that, because you're not on the inside looking out."⁴⁹

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan strategically decouple the coalition from their counterinsurgency objective and pulls Afghan public support away from them and the Afghan government. A common, current Afghan sentiment is "We know that they [coalition forces] don't intend to kill the civilians but we don't believe they care enough not to. If it continues we will see a lot more people joining the fight against the foreigners."⁵⁰ There is growing resentment and outrage in Afghanistan over U.S.-led operations that inflict civilian casualties as a result of airstrikes and house raids.⁵¹ Public opinion polls also show growing dissatisfaction in Afghanistan. In an October 2008 Asia Foundation Poll in Afghanistan asking if things in Afghanistan were going in

the right direction, only 38% responded yes which was a decline from 2006 results when 44 % responded yes.⁵² In the same poll, those who responded they were going in the wrong direction cited insecurity as the top reason. In a different study conducted by Charney Research in November 2007, only 42% of Afghans surveyed thought the U.S. was doing a good to excellent job in Afghanistan which is lower than the 2005 result of 68%.⁵³ This same research group asked if attacks against the U.S. military could be justified, 17 % responded yes and 75 % no. Although results from data in the polls cannot be attributed directly to civilian casualties, one cannot help but wonder if it is a significant contributing factor.

The increasing trend in civilian casualty related airstrikes must be stopped. Civilian casualties outrage the very people the coalition is trying to protect, fuels the insurgent's propaganda machine, and turns members of the favorable active minority and neutral majority into insurgents. For every ACM we kill we have the potential of replace them with five more as discontent and a cycle of revenge is established. A balance must be struck between the use of kinetic airpower to meet tactical and operational needs and the strategic objective of counterinsurgency to win the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan.

Balancing Kinetic Effects

Kinetic airpower is a key and essential tool for the counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan. The coalition cannot ignore the effects civilian casualty related airstrikes have on the attainment of their strategic objective in counterinsurgency. A balance must be struck between the military objective at the tactical and operational level versus the political objective at the strategic level because counterinsurgency wars are won at

the strategic level. That being said, "...we need to be careful lest we overbalance away from according the military dimension its proper due"⁵⁴ as security is the key enabler for other functions of counterinsurgency and the Afghan people's top concern. To balance the kinetic effects of airpower with counterinsurgency objectives in Afghanistan and guarantee its continued use, the coalition needs to employ a three prong approach. First, reduce the potential for civilian casualties. Second, proactively engage the Afghan public when civilian casualties occur. Third, wrap the whole process in an information campaign.

Reduce Civilian Casualties. The first step forward is to reduce the potential for airstrike related civilian casualties. Theater Rules of Engagement and guidance for kinetic airpower employment have recently been adjusted to reduce the potential of civilian casualties.⁵⁵ Further measures need to be incorporated to aid in this reduction effort and they are focused education, increased theater ISR, adjusted tactics, techniques & procedures (TTP) and system/weapon requirements. The first area the U.S. can improve is airman counterinsurgency education. The Air Force needs to educate its airmen on counterinsurgency, down to the lowest levels, with a focus on the intelligence, Joint Terminal Air Control, and aircrew career fields. These career fields need a deeper understanding of counterinsurgency warfare principles and dynamics. A deeper understanding of this complex and ever-changing problem will help airmen understand the implications of their actions in counterinsurgency operations beyond the tactical and operational level. It will help them make better choices during mission execution that will positively affect the U.S.'s strategic objectives while balancing mission achievement at the tactical and operational level.

The coalition must increase its ISR capabilities in Afghanistan, both in capacity and ability, to keep up with mission requirements. Airmen and the ground force commander need more information on the battlespace to better understand the civilian disposition of a target and to avoid civilian casualties. The goal is to have persistent surveillance, equivalent to an unblinking eye, of targets and areas of interest so as to create “pattern of life” data for civilians and to monitor insurgent activity. This will help the GFC build target awareness to the point where he can predict with near certainty if civilians are located within the lethal radius of insurgents being targeted. This increased target awareness will help reduce targeting error and civilian casualties.

An increase in ISR capability will also open new options for tactics, techniques, and procedures. Coalition forces should employ a TTP of retrograde, monitor and finish when engaged in an urban environment and little is known about the civilian disposition of a target or if civilians are present. With this TTP, if able, the GFC will withdraw friendly forces outside the ACM's effective weapons range and monitor the tactical situation. Once withdrawn, the GFC will request overhead ISR and conduct surveillance of the ACM firing position. Once the ACM leave their firing position, use ISR to track them until they are in an area where they can be engaged on favorable terms at which time they can be either captured or killed. If the GFC cannot retrograde or friendly force lives are in eminent danger, he should first employ non-kinetic airpower through a show of force to break contact. If that fails, then accept the risk associated with low target awareness and employ kinetic airpower.

Finally, the coalition should impose additional requirement for kinetic airpower employment in urban environments with respect to systems and weapons. One

requirement should be for aircraft to have an active optical or infrared target pod in order to employ weapons in urban areas. The benefit of having a pod is that aircrew can back up the GFC by monitoring the target before employment to improve target awareness and having a pod increases the aircrew's ability to find, fix and finish the correct target. Another requirement should be the utilization of more low collateral damage weapons in urban areas. Using this type of weapon will not necessarily reduce civilian casualties as the majority of casualties in this fight are inflicted due to targeting errors, not weapon effects issues. None the less, it will help when the causes are weapon malfunctions, weapons effects or aircrew error.

Proactively Engage Afghan Public. The second step is to proactively engage the Afghan public when civilian casualties occur or are reported. There is no such thing as the mythical “clean war” void of civilian casualties so coalition forces must be prepared for civilian casualties and be proactive when they occur. To be proactive, the coalition must investigate, communicate and compensate.

The coalition should be immediately prepared to conduct an initial field investigation after any airstrike in an urban area or when property damage or civilian casualties are suspected. The GFC should do a site exploitation after the engagement is complete, threat permitting. During the exploitation he should investigate to determine facts about the engagement from the civilian perspective and determine the extent of damage and casualties. He should document the investigation with still photography and video recording. The GFC should then locate the village elder and give him an account of what led to the airstrike and the impact on the village. If the initial field investigation determines non-combatant civilian casualties were involved, the

coalition should immediately create a formal joint investigation team with representatives from the Afghan government, ISAF, U.S. forces, U.N. Assistance Mission Afghanistan, a legitimate media source, International Red Cross and Human Rights Watch. The joint investigation team should conduct a transparent investigation and publicly report the results to the Afghan people and the media as soon as possible. Once the investigation is complete, the coalition and Afghan government should provide adequate and timely compensation to the victims. It is paramount that our actions show the Afghan people how deeply we care when property and lives are lost as a result of counterinsurgency operations and that we investigate to ensure we avoid such events in the future.

Information Warfare Campaign. The third step is to wrap all our efforts to balance the kinetic effects of airpower in an information campaign. Information is the strategically decisive front in counterinsurgency and we need to use information operations to divide and conquer.⁵⁶ The information campaign must target the correct audience, establish primary vectors to communicate the message, shape the battlespace and communicate the message in a timely manner.

The primary audience in the counterinsurgency is the Afghan people. They are the ones who make up the active minorities and neutral majorities the coalition is trying to influence. They are the ones who will determine the winner of this conflict. All messages must be crafted and targeted with our strategic objectives relative to them in mind. All other audiences such as the international community, the U.S., and the insurgents take a back seat to the Afghan people in this war. Although support from the other audiences is important, it is not as paramount as the Afghan audience.

The coalition should use all vectors at its disposal to communicate its message to the Afghan public but based on Afghan culture and media capabilities, there are three primary means that will be more effective than others and must be exploited; village elders, tribal relations, and radio. With seventy-seven percent of the people located in the rural areas and based on their culture and strong tribal/family ties, Afghans are very village and tribal centric in daily life.⁵⁷ In 2008, the second most popular means of receiving information about events occurring in Afghanistan was through friends, families and neighbors.⁵⁸ The coalition needs to leverage this fact and to set up a communications network based upon it. The coalition should form an information distribution network that utilizes village elders and tribal leaders as a vector for communication with the Afghan people. A program like this will empower local leaders helping to build good government relations and provide an excellent means for word-of-mouth communication to get the coalition's message out and counter insurgent propaganda. The most popular means of receiving information about events occurring in Afghanistan is radio with eighty-four percent of the Afghan population having a radio in the house.⁵⁹ The coalition should target local and international radio stations with reach into Afghanistan. For international stations, the coalition should target BBC World Radio as it has one of the largest listener bases in Afghanistan and the people trust information broadcast by that service.⁶⁰ The coalition should also target sources such as print media and television, but with a national literacy rate of twenty-eight percent⁶¹ and a television ownership rate of thirty-eight percent⁶²; these vectors will not have the reach of the other three aforementioned vectors.

The coalition needs to shape the battlespace in order to make its message more effective and to help propagate it through the Afghan population. The way they can do this is by preparing the population for negative events and by decreasing the time required to execute the information decision cycle or OODA loop⁶³. To prepare the population for negative events before they occur, the coalition should brief the media and public on the kinetic airpower target process and issues as well as on measures used to minimize civilian casualties while highlighting the insurgent's disregard for Afghan lives. This will show that the coalition makes every effort to preserve Afghan lives so if civilian casualties occur during an airstrike the public will be sensitized to that fact.⁶⁴ While it is important for the coalition to insure accuracy in information before release it is just as important to release it in a timely manner so it is relevant. The coalition must take measures to decrease its information OODA loop. The coalition can achieve this with the help of airstrike initial field investigations but the other key is not to wait to release information until they have the complete solution. The coalition needs to make incremental media releases and to be candid and transparent with the information available. The worst thing the coalition can do is to be silent. If they are silent they create the perception that they are hiding negative information and their legitimacy will suffer.

Finally, the coalition needs to increase the amount of information it provides the public on insurgent atrocities and their tactics of using human shields to avoid airstrikes. If insurgent actions cost or put civilian lives in jeopardy during an airstrike, the coalition should highlight that fact but not overtly use it to legitimize the actions taken by the coalition. They should focus on insurgent actions and their lack of regard for the Afghan

people. To make this message credible they should put an Afghani face on the issue by interviewing the victims and letting them tell their story of how the ACM precipitated the civilian casualties. The coalition should also make every effort to give media access to the locations of these events to the point of providing transportation if it is in a remote area. Transparency is key in this area and putting an Afghani face on the information being delivered will help it resonate with the Afghan public.

In the end, the Azizabad operation was an informational and strategic failure. After a second investigation was conducted into the 22 August 2008 airstrike by USAF Brigadier General Michael Callan, the U.S. revised its casualty number to report 22 ACM and 33 civilians were killed, of which 3 were woman and 12 were children. The inability to balance the kinetic effects of airpower with the strategic counterinsurgency objective was the root cause of the Azizabad failure.

Conclusion

Kinetic airpower is a valuable tool in the Combatant Commander's and ground force commander's toolkit. Measures must be taken to balance the kinetic effects of airpower with the strategic counterinsurgency objective or we will lose this valuable tool in the fight against the insurgents, but more importantly, we will lose the strategic fight in Afghanistan. Balance is crucial and we must work to achieve it immediately.

Endnotes

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⁶³ The OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide and Act) is a concept developed by USAF Col John Boyd and is the process by which an entity (either an individual or an organization) reacts to an event.

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